

A SPEECH DELIVERED BY DR. ABEL DAFIAGHOR ON THE OCCASION OF THE 2009 “BORO DAY SUMMIT AND 12TH ANNUAL SERVICE & DEVOTION AWARD CEREMONY ON SATURDAY, MAY 30, 2009 AT THE SHERATON NEWARK AIRPORT HOTEL, NEWARK, NEW JERSEY, UNITED STATES.

“CHALLENGES TO SURMOUNT AS A PEOPLE”

PROTOCOL

The Chairman of the Occasion...

I want to thank you for inviting me here today. This very act of inviting me is a great step towards the process of self-introspection that you seek. The Niger Delta question has existed for many decades and various means have been used by various sons and daughters of the region to attempt to answer the question.

I will endeavor not to bore you with what many of us here already know; i.e. the ‘Niger Delta Question’ which are the inequity, injustice and underdevelopment to name a few. Many of us here know the origins of the question, the heroes and villains and the contention between the people and Government.

For this moment, we will forgo looking at the government to provide the solution. We want to know what we can do as individuals and a people of the Niger Delta to ensure equity and justice and alleviate the conditions of our people and our land.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is the home of the black gold- Oil and Gas that keeps the Nigerian State and economy country afloat. However, the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been in the news nationally and internationally as a result of the very peculiar challenges which our peoples and our communities have been battling with before oil, and later gas were exploited in our region.

Permit me Ladies and Gentlemen to start by giving you a brief profile of the man we have gathered here to celebrate today. Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro was an Ijaw nationalist that burned with the passionate and zeal to remedy the injustice that minority ethnicities in the Delta suffered in a Nigerian state dominated by the large ethnic groups.

Boro was intelligent, quick-witted, disciplined and brave. He was an enigma in his depths. A radical young nationalist who led a revolt against the oppressors to change the environment of the Niger Delta so that the people can regard themselves as equals amongst equals and not as second class citizens to the rest of the country. He thus shaped the course and destiny of this nation and till date still a dominant figure in the lives of the minorities not only of the Niger Delta region but the entire nation, Nigeria.

Boro gave the Niger Delta struggle its defining complexion and ideology and this is the man we have come here to celebrate today.

Now having said all these, we can learn from Boro's brief sojourn on this earth that he was a person who fought for his belief in equity and justice. He was multitalented and also quite versatile and adaptive. He was a law enforcer, teacher, student leader (in fact, he started the first student's union bus service on campus), freedom fighter and a Nigerian patriot. In tackling the Niger Delta question today, we should invoke the versatile and adaptive spirit of Boro both as a group and as individuals.

Are We Employing The Best Strategies?

History is replete with great revolutions and conquests, from Alexander the Great to Julius Caesar to the French revolution, the Latin American revolutions, the Cuban revolution and most recently, the South African revolution which strangulated apartheid and created an equitable and egalitarian rainbow nation. One major factor which has hallmarked most of these great historical feats is the intellectual component which not only defined the struggle but equally set down the sacrosanct letters of the dialectics of the struggle. Great leaders like Alexander, Chairman Mao, Che Guevera, Julius Nyerere, Samora Marchel, Jonas Savimbi, Steve Biko and the unparalleled Nelson Mandela were master strategists and leaders of thought even amongst their peers. They ensured that the focus of the struggle was not derailed by excessive radicalism and criminality.

Sadly however, the same cannot be said for our own brand of revolution and militancy. Once upon a time, the agitation was grounded on principles of intellectual and articulate strategies. Today, elements of criminality have infiltrated the struggle and we are now like a pariah region in the commonwealth of federating states in Nigeria.

We must also seek ways of ensuring the establishment of a collective, united front as Niger Delta peoples without necessarily creating an anathemic conglomerate in opposition to the united Nigeria project. As a people we have merged into the network of globalization and we must address the problems we face in relation to the global parallels that reflect our genuine agitations. Ken Saro-Wiwa tried successfully to achieve this global attention and we must not only build on it but improve our dynamics in the outreach environment.

The problem of development is a global challenge and for the Niger Delta to meet the goals in the future, there is the need to formulate and implement policies that will promote transparency and accountability; overcome institutional constraints; promote poverty eradication; bring about structural change; enhance distributive equity; engender social and cultural re-orientation; engineer political transformation; promote human development; practice inclusive urban development; generate employment and transform power relations.

I believe very much in how the Chinese write the word "crisis". The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word "crisis". One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger — but recognize the opportunity. I profoundly believe that the current crisis unleashed upon us by circumstances is a divine opportunity for each of us as Niger Deltans to help our kith and kin, both in the Diaspora and at home. We must lift up our wearied hearts and start seeing the ray of hope at the end of the tunnel.

Every form of bondage in history has always propelled a resilient and “never say die” people to achieve great things for themselves and future generations. The Americans, Israelis, Koreans and fellow Africans- South Africans and Ghanaians readily come to mind. How did they move out of the abyss of socio-economic and political despair to accomplish greatness for themselves? It took a renewed man with a renewed mind to bring about the needed change.

The line of thought I am called upon to address today is “*Challenges to surmount as a people*”. I say to all, transformation of the Niger Delta region starts as soon as we begin to recognize the fact that our destiny rest in our own hands and not in the hands of the Government. We must stop seeing ourselves as those oppressed, battered and those to be continually pitied. This should not haunt us any longer. Let us forge a united front of common socio-economic renewal; as recently exemplified in Tinapa. Let’s ensure that the new accord forged in Tinapa is not just in words but in deed. We must seek a new intellectualized, knowledge based and internationalized dimension to this struggle and start practicing a silent revolution of true federalism, a region based and vibrant economy that would make us a people to be envied not pitied.

Whatever energy left in us, must now be channeled towards building the Niger Delta that will be the envy of all. You are that man or woman to make the needed change. The future may not be kind to us if we refuse to take advantage of this opportunity.

Let us now start thinking of how to move out of our comfort zones in America to reinvest our time, our talent and energy towards building a better region.

AS INDIVIDUALS:

Many decades ago foreign missionaries such as Mary Slessor, then a nurse, left her own comfort zone to the mosquito infested Niger Delta, Calabar to be specific, to help put a stop to the practice of killing twins at birth.

Our own Samuel Ajayi Crowther chose to return back home to water the seed of Christian ministry that helped nurture the greatness in some of us seated here today who attended those great missionary schools of yester- years. What about the patience of Nelson Mandela, the courage of Jerry Rawlings and the sacrifice of our own Ken Saro Wiwa?

We are the ones to set up the model schools and hospitals. The ones to proceed individually or in groups back to the region as volunteer doctors, nurses, teachers, clergy, and counselors and so on. We as individuals can start opening businesses and providing services to our people.

We can campaign to foreign MNC, particularly International Oil Companies (IOCs) to move into the area. (We must assure the safety of lives and properties). We can advocate, request and encourage good Governance at state and local government levels. Where is all the money the region has received or earned in the past 10 years?

To further challenge our mental psyche to without further doubts; I want to quote the some of the words from the timeless inaugural speech by the great John F. Kennedy, the 35th President of the United States; that propelled America to land a man on the moon few years later.

“And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country”. John F. Kennedy

Like Kennedy let us today and every other day as individuals ask ourselves what we can bequeath towards a better Niger Delta.

AS A PEOPLE:

We need to love ourselves more:

The Ijaws have had more prominent positions than ever before; VP, Chief of Defence Staff and Ministers to name a few. But how have we responded? No unity of command or purpose. We tend to fight ourselves.

The Niger Delta Question is not an Ijaws question: The Ijaws cannot do it alone. Again my presence here today is part of the shift that this organization has made over the years to reach out to our Ijaw neighbors. More than ever before this shift must be accelerated. We need to understand that we do not only share boundaries with our neighbors but also culture and resources. The Ijaw neighbors need to understand that the clamor for equity and justice is universal to the Niger Delta and all the states in Nigeria. Neighbors need to understand that if it is the Ijaws today, it could be them tomorrow. We should not forget who it was between 1967 and 1970, in Nigeria as a young republic; remember the Biafran war.

Being an Urhobo, I see all Urhobo neighbors as brothers and sisters. In fact, my mother's early formations years were in Ijaw communities. If she had stayed longer, my father would have been Ijaw. Our leader Chief EK Clark is a living testimony, Chief Bozimo, the former Minister of State for Police Affairs is another example. In 1999 when the military invaded Odi it was noted that half of those affected were of Urhobo and Isoko extractions. Today, ten years later Gbaramatu Kingdom has been invaded. When the bombing, shelling and shooting stops, the noise dies down and dusts settles, who is to say how many Urhobos, Isokos, Itsekiris or Ukwanis will be affected. The people of the Niger Delta have inter-married each other for decades; we share a lot in common, from our culture to the Nigerian black gold of oil and gas. The Ijaws must reach out to their neighbors, because on the Niger Delta Question, our faith is intertwined. The Ijaws must reach out to all ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, oppression and injustice concerns us all. Finally we must reach out to all States and Peoples in the Nigerian Federation before it becomes their turn tomorrow.

I cannot however end this talk without commenting on the recent happenings in the Gbaramatu Kingdom of the Niger Delta area. We have watched in horror as the Nigerian Military deliberately embarked on what can be minimally described as a deliberate ravaging and decimation of Ijaw communities in Delta State all in the name of trying to end the activities of militants in the Niger Delta area.

It is sad that 43 years after Isaac Boro was arrested, sentenced and convicted to death by hanging for the same reasons, the Nigerian establishment has still continued to resort to force of arms as the panacea to deal with the Niger Delta situation.

I want to state categorically that military intervention is not and can never be an alternative to resolving developmental challenges especially when it involves the violation of the sacrosanct rights of citizenship. Nigeria cannot continue to create a war mentality or promote the siege mindset which has defined the relationship between successive governments and the peoples of the Niger Delta since oil was discovered in Oloibiri. The government needs to understand that they cannot continue to do the same thing and expect different results; their forceful approach just leads to proliferation of violence and an exponential growth in the number of militants. History attests to this.

Today, as we celebrate Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro, let us resolve that this will be the last time we will give the Nigerian Establishment the opportunity to ravage our communities with soldiers. We cannot keep rebuilding our communities. We must press forward, improve and consolidate on what we have already built. We must nudge the norm and dialogue with the powers that be and assist the government waste our resources on guns and ammunitions to fight the militants, but spend on resources that can be used to develop the region.

Because the Niger Delta is a region of proud people, I believe that if the region is developed, the government would not have to worry about militants, the people will personally take care of the militants. I am sure some of you recall one or two instances back in the days when community members melted out 'jungle justice' to an 'ole' or paraded criminals in broad daylight to the shame and chagrin of relatives. Niger Deltans understand justice and a humane disciplined happy lifestyle. It is our way of life and we shall strive to preserve it unto future generations.

I thank you all for your attention and thanks again for the invitation.
Thank you.

Dr Abel Dafiaghor
05/30/09